

EAST GERMAN COMMUNISTS FIGHT RELIGION

April 1959

EAST GERMAN COMMUNISTS FIGHT RELIGION

The Communist state of East Germany is engaged in a war of attrition against the powerful Evangelical Church and its 16 million members.

Faithful to the precepts of Communism that Christianity must be wiped out as rapidly as possible in order to make way for the materialistic order ordained by Marx-Leninism, the Pankow regime is keeping up a relentless pressure on the church in the Eastern zone.

However, despite their desire to see the end of religious morality as rapidly as possible, the Communists are fully aware that the Evangelical Church is a powerful element that cannot be dismissed summarily.

The Evangelical Church is a closely knit organization because it developed organized resistance during the Nazi period and it opposed Hitler's efforts to make the churches amenable to totalitarian rule. Thus, in 1945, the Evangelical and Catholic Churches turned out to be the only public institutions functioning with popular support in Germany.

In its present struggle with the Communists the Evangelicals have been doing everything possible to maintain the illusion that they are members of an All-German Church and that the dividing line between the West and East does not exist. However, in practice, Bishop Dibelius, head of the All-German Evangelical Church, has little influence in the East and is not even allowed to visit the eastern parts of his diocese.

Since the end of the war, although the Church has been undeniably weakened in some aspects of its activity, it still remains a force in Eastern Germany and will likely continue to be so for some time.

For this reason, the Communists have had to proceed with caution, employing a sweet and sour tactic by putting on a show of seeming reason and amiability and then following it up with a show of ruthlessness.

Broadcasting over the West Berlin radio on the situation of the Church in East Germany during 1958, Bishop Dibelius declared that "by and large, the picture is unchanged." There had been some slight relaxation in Church-State relations after the uncompromising hostility shown by the regime during the first half of the year, the Bishop said, but the regime's determination to bring about a radical transformation of the

population's mentality and way of life was evidently unchanged. With uncompromising persistence they are trying to transform men's minds, to make men abandon their Christian faith and adopt the materialist view of life. This aim is pursued from the kindergarten onwards, through the ruthlessly enforced Jugendweihe (Communist youth initiation ceremony) and throughout life." Life is bitter and painful for all those who question the State's right to transform their minds, the Bishop concluded, since open resistance in a totalitarian State is extremely hazardous. Moreover, there is always the threatening presence of the Soviet troops to be reckoned with.

Atheism the Keynote

There can be absolutely no doubt about the basic atheism that underlies the intentions of the East German regime.

While East German Government spokesmen frequently claim that the State does not interfere in matters which are the concern of the churches, it remains a fact that their teachings are constantly under attack. Gerhart Eisler, a leading propagandist, has openly attacked the Ten Commandments, for example. Writing in the Communist youth newspaper Junge Welt on October 11, 1958, he declared that "only a Socialist society can proclaim the moral principles of doing away with the exploitation of man by man. As for the Ten Commandments, we deny their so-called supernatural Divine origin and we can prove it scientifically. The Ten Commandments are no obstacle to the criminal policy of the imperialists."

One of the clearest expositions of how the State feels about the Church emanates from the pen of Kurt Hager, formerly head of the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the East German Communist Party (SED) and now professor of Dialectical Materialism at Humboldt University. In an article in Einheit, the monthly theoretical organ of the SED, Hager wrote:

"The founders of Marxism-Leninism always pursued an implacable war against idealistic and religious views. In our struggle against imperialism and militarism it is essential to unmask relentlessly all the devices of idealism...and to propagate widely materialist ideas. Marxism, however, does not take the view that idealism and religion can be abolished simply by the dissemination of scientific knowledge. The complete overcoming of religion can only be achieved by the final destruction of the social order of the exploiters and the establishment of the Communist society. The realization of Socialism and Communism will destroy the material roots which nourish

religious beliefs...(but) long after capitalism has been destroyed, religious attitudes remain which cannot be thrust aside by force or administrative measures. From this emerge important conclusions for our practical work.

"The first and fundamental task of our Party is not the struggle against religion, but the winning over of religious believers to the struggle for the maintenance and securing of peace against the American and Bonn war policy and for the democratic reunification of Germany, for active participation in the peaceful work of all peace-loving peoples--above all with the peoples of the Soviet Union. This campaign is in the interests of Christian people. We place in the foreground the things which unite us rather than the things which divide--the need to win over all Christian workers to cooperate in solving the vital problems of the German people and the erection of the foundation of Socialism in the German Democratic Republic."

Hager explains the sporadic character of the onslaught on religion in East Germany when he pointed out that while popular scientific propaganda must be increased, this must be done "patiently and without offending the feelings of religious believers." Among these directives on tolerance and gentle persuasion, there is a warning to the leaders of the Church: "We cannot silently pass over the reactionary machinations of the leaders of the Evangelical and Catholic Churches who support the policy of Adenauer, the policy of remilitarization, of revenge, of chauvinism and who use the Church in the GDR as a base for imperialist forces."

The article sums up the policy of the East German regime towards the Church and explains much that seems contradictory in it. Basically, it is anti-religious and aims to destroy religious beliefs. But, for political reasons to further the aim of extending the Communist regime to the whole of Germany, the struggle against religion is to be subdued. In this manner it is hoped to win the support of practicing Christians in East Germany for a united Communist German State and to keep up an appropriate facade for policy consumption.

Because of this there is no doubt that the Pankow regime would like to have the full support of influential leaders such as Bishop Dibelius. But since this is impossible, they seek to discredit the leaders of the Church by representing them as "tools of American and Bonn imperialism and militarism."

One fact emerges very clearly from the record of Church-State relations in East Germany since the end of the war. The

Communist regime has found virtually no support for its doctrines or policies among the leaders of the Evangelical Church, in contrast with the situation in some East European countries. The very few so-called "progressive Christians" in East Germany have no importance within the Church and so little outside it that, for example, Neue Zeit, organ of the East German Christian Democratic Union, has to depend upon members of the Polish PAX Movement for contributions expounding "progressive Christian" views.

The Evangelical bishops have repeatedly stressed that the Church does not wish to be a political resistance movement or to do anything which would link it with any political tendency. But they insist that the Church cannot disregard the duty of challenging "false scientific concepts which lead to confusion of conscience" and of refuting "theoretical and practical atheism."

Since the fall of 1955, considerable pressure has been brought to bear upon the leaders of the Church to give a declaration of loyalty to the State. But they have made it clear that while they are prepared to respect the State "as a reality," they will not give unqualified endorsement to all the policies of the regime that a formal declaration would imply.

The Communist view on this has been succinctly expressed by Vice President Zaisser of the Soviet Home Affairs Administration in Germany in these words:

"The Church has allowed itself to be utilized as the trumpet of Western imperialism. There is still room in the concentration camps of the Soviet Zone for these celestial comedians."

In such a State it can cause no surprise that the Communist newspaper Neues Deutschland published on Christmas Eve an obscene parody of the world-famed carol, "Silent Night, Holy Night," which said:

"Silent night, peace on earth and good will towards men. Why not? But whose was the kingdom, the power and the glory so far? Man has longed for a star of Bethlehem, but the star remained pale and remote....Peace on earth in this age is guaranteed by a new star, a star made by man himself, red and five-pointed."

Tactical Harassment

Throughout the years the East German regime has made countless efforts to harass the Church, to weaken it financially, to lampoon its tenets, to defame its leaders and to attempt to make it look ridiculous, particularly in the eyes of the youth of the country.

The long-range policy of the government is to seek to starve out the churches by limiting the training of new clergy, while forbidding them from bringing in reinforcements from outside. The Catholic Church, with some two million members in the East Zone, is already desperately short of priests and nuns to carry on its work and if the Soviet power continues in control the churches may gradually shrink in size and influence.

Although the Communists have not yet dared to declare open warfare on the powerful churches, they have borne down hard on some of the smaller ones. The Christian Scientists and Jehovah's Witnesses have been banned. Neither, however, was banned on purely religious grounds. The Christian Scientists fell under a "Law Concerning Natural Healers," while the Witnesses were tried for "warmongering, espionage and boycotting democratic institutions." They had boycotted the spurious Stockholm "peace" appeal and the equally phony elections. Their belief in the coming end of the world makes them "saboteurs of reconstruction" under Communist law. Some 600 Witnesses are believed to be in prison, some with sentences ranging to life.

Communist harassing operations against the Protestant and Catholic churches have been directed chiefly against their solvency and the training of clergymen. Although church property rights have been officially recognized, the churches have been prevented by a variety of expedients from gaining adequate financial returns from their holdings. The restitution of church property confiscated by the Hitlerians was virtually negated by administrative obstacles. Although the churches were formally exempted from the operation of the land reform program, lands to which the church had no clear title, or which were held in hereditary tenure, were taken over.

The right of the churches to tax their members has not been formally forbidden, but since 1950 the churches have had to make the collections themselves, although traditionally this has always been done by the State which then remitted the monies to the ecclesiastical authorities. The churches have been hampered in making the collections by a total lack of access to public records. There probably has been a reduction of some 50 percent in church revenues through these and other financial harassments.

The heaviest financial blow to the religious organizations came at the time of the currency exchange in 1948. Although State-approved organizations were able to exchange old East marks for new ones on a one-for-one basis, the churches were allowed to exchange only on a one-for-ten basis. This measure eliminated 90 percent of the financial resources of the church. In addition, debts contracted in the old currency had to be paid off in the new currency on a one-for-one basis.

The church also finds it difficult to get financial aid from Western Germany. GDR regulations allow conversion of West marks into East marks only on a one-for-one basis, whereas the actual value of the currency is about four and one-half East marks to one West mark.

Church collections also have been restricted by the authorities. While formerly church groups could make house-to-house canvasses and solicit funds in public places, they may now solicit funds only on the street and at church. These collections must be sanctioned by the civil authorities who only permit them about three times a year. Each permit is only good for four days and as an added harassment the permits are never granted in the months of good weather, but only in the fall and winter.

Harassment has also taken the form of a series of attacks on different institutions such as church schools, kindergartens, hospitals, homes for orphans and the aged and the Railway Missions. This has been done gradually and during the anti-church drive of 1952-1953 many church homes and orphanages were taken over. In January 1956 a group of officials and social workers of the Evangelical Railway Missions were arrested on charges of "collecting information of military and economic importance" and helping East German citizens to flee to the West. They were eventually released, but of the former 97 railway missions only half a dozen have been able to continue their work.

Much the same thing has happened to the charitable organizations known as the Evangelical Welfare Mission. Several of its officials were arrested in July 1957 on charges of conspiring with the organization's West German offices to kidnap East German children. They were later released, but the organization's work has been seriously hampered.

In June 1958 the East German Communists launched a series of violent attacks on the management of an Evangelical children's home in Pomerania and church officials feared that this was but a beginning. The drive came only two weeks after the Communists

in the region forced the Roman Catholic management of Saint Joseph's home at Stralsund to turn over its 60 children to a state-run institution. The home's license was revoked and the teaching permits of the nuns were cancelled because they allegedly failed to follow the "socialist educational system."

At the same time another attack was launched on the Evangelical home located at Greifswald. Singled out as a special campaign target was Dean Kusch, the home's director. He was charged with failing in his supervisory duties, and the Communist press added that "nothing else could be expected of this man who at the recent Synod of the Evangelical Church had kept silent on the atomic rearmament of West Germany." This remark indicates the true reason for the attack which had nothing to do with the way the home was run.

Continual Arrests

Barely a day goes by without the Communist press announcing the arrest of some churchmen--Catholic as well as Protestant--on some patently trumped-up charges. In February 1959, 11 Catholic laymen of Rathenow were sentenced by the Potsdam District Court to terms of imprisonment of up to five years on charges of "espionage camouflaged as Catholic activities." As the Berlin Catholic journal Petrusblatt pointed out, it was obvious that no witnesses were called at the trial and the defendants were sentenced for having contact with an organization which did not exist. Church protests that no Catholic organization such as that cited in the indictment existed were ignored.

Shortly after this came the trial of four Jesuit priests who were sentenced to terms of imprisonment of up to five years at hard labor. This time the charge was the familiar Communist one of "currency offenses," coupled with the accusation they had helped people to flee the East German workers' paradise.

In the summer of 1958, Hugo Hermes, Catholic Chaplain of Bad Koesen, was sentenced to 16 months in prison for the "unlawful possession" of theological books of West German origin and for the stand he had taken against the Communist youth consecration ceremony, known as the Jugendweihe. The case aroused great indignation and on August 11 a crowd of over 4,000 Protestants and Catholics gathered in Naumburg Cathedral to protest. They were addressed by the Evangelical and Catholic bishops and were told that when Hermes moved in the course of his duties from West to East Germany, he had received official permission to bring his books with him.

In December 1957 Protestant pastor Maercker of Pankow was sentenced to two and one-half years in prison for urging his sons not to join the People's Police. In the same month several

church journals were confiscated and two pastors had to flee for their lives to West Berlin.

In February 1958 Bishop Dibelius was banned from entering East Germany which includes 90 percent of his Brandenburg diocese. In April, the Ministry of Education forbade religious instruction in the schools and ordered two-week courses in dialectical materialism instead in camps for children of pre-confirmation age.

It is impossible to give more than a few illustrations of such persecution since it is a daily occurrence and many scores of pastors and priests are in East German jails on similar charges. However, an analysis of anti-church manifestations for 1955 shows there was a considerable tightening up. Church newspapers were repeatedly confiscated, clergymen continued to be arrested on spurious charges and school teachers were exhorted to "take measures against the superstition of religion," while food allocations were denied to confessional kindergartens.

A particularly distasteful example of Communist persecution tactics was reported in January 1959, when a young mother in East Germany was deprived of her children because of her religious beliefs. The Stralsund District Court had granted a divorce to an official and awarded him the custody of the two children of the marriage on political grounds. In a rider to the decision, the Court declared that the wife had "brought up these two young children on strictly religious principles. The Court cannot approve of such upbringing as it gives no guarantee of education in the spirit of democracy, socialism, patriotism or international friendship." The Court also ordered the mother to make monthly payments for the children's maintenance.

Youth the Target of Atheism

In the conflict of ideas between Church and State, the main objective of the Communists is to estrange the youth of the country from the religion of their fathers. In 1955 the regime established an innovation called the Jugendweihe, a substitute for church confirmation, in which the youngsters pledge loyalty to the State, thus diverting their loyalties into political channels.

Preparation for the Jugendweihe takes place in the last few school weeks before Easter for boys and girls in their eighth school year. The 25 hours of preparatory instruction include lectures on science, the universe, the earth and its peoples' alleged political aims, lectures on medicine and on the human body. The festival itself is conducted in a festive atmosphere. There are speeches, singing of national hymns and finally the oath by the youngsters. The children are

given a copy of a State-approved book, while the parents get a bonus of 50 marks for each of their children participating.

The oath-taking goes in the following manner. The children are addressed:

"Dear Young Friends--Are you prepared as faithful sons and daughters of our State to work and to fight for a happy life for the whole German people? Are you prepared together with us to give all your strength to the great and noble cause of socialism? Are you prepared to work together for the friendship of the peoples and the Soviet people and all men who love peace to insure and defend world peace?"

After the children have promised this, the master of ceremonies then says:

"We have accepted your promise. You have set yourself an exalted and noble goal. You have enrolled yourself in the host of missions of men who are working and fighting for peace and socialism. We solemnly receive you into the community of all the workers in our German Democratic Republic and promise you support, protection and help."

The initial response of the Church was naturally a negative one to this ceremony. A Bishops' Conference was held to discuss the matter and shortly afterwards a letter was read from the pulpit in which the position of the Church was defined. The Church refused to accept the contention of the State that it was permissible for a boy or girl to participate both in the Jugendweihe and in a religious confirmation. It insisted that church members must refuse the Jugendweihe on penalty of being ejected from the Church.

At the beginning, the idea of the Jugendweihe was not very popular and only a few children participated. The State then began to exert pressure in various ways on the children and their parents to ensure better results. In 1957-1958, for example, children in SED holiday camps were told to write to their parents asking permission to take part in the youth dedication ceremony. Each morning the names of those who had obtained permission were read out and the others were urged to follow their example.

When six-year-olds were admitted to school, their mothers were asked if they would allow their children to take part in youth dedication when they were older. If they answered in the

affirmative, they were told that it would be better for the child's future if he did not participate in religious education. Despite these and other means--such as threats of economic reprisals against the fathers--no more than 10 percent of eligible children took part in the pagan ceremonies.

Therefore, more drastic measures were adopted for the 1958 youth dedication year. The Party, mass organizations (trade unions, youth organizations, etc.) and the departments for education in the local council were all ordered to give the fullest possible support to ensure dedication for all children. The drive was launched by SED leader Walter Ulbricht himself in a speech opening the Dedication Year at Sonnenberg, in Thuringia, on September 29. He bitterly attacked religious training, declaring it was intolerable that the learning of great inventors and scientists should be suppressed by "reactionary false piety."

This strong official backing given to youth dedication was directly contrary to the undertaking given to representatives of the churches by Premier Grotewohl in December 1956, when he assured them that youth dedication was to be a non-State institution run on a purely voluntary basis. As a result, a letter of protest was sent by the ecclesiastical authorities to the government.

The protest was answered by Minister of the Interior Karl Maron in a letter published in Neues Deutschland on November 19. He declared it was the "right and duty" of the State to support efforts to educate young people in the spirit of its policy. Youth dedication, therefore, he said, had the "support of all State organs and institutions and especially those concerned with education."

As a result of all these pressures, the youth dedication has been having greater success and in 1958 it was estimated that 45-50 percent of the elementary school graduates took part in the Jugendweihe. This compares with only about 15 percent in 1955. In the face of this, the Church has been forced to tone down its original interdict that participation in the State ceremony automatically ruled out later church confirmation.

The Evangelical Church still regards the Jugendweihe as paying at least lip service to atheism and hence a sin. But realistic Bishop Dibelius and other church leaders in East Germany have decided they must henceforth emphasize the Church's readiness to forgive. Therefore, youngsters who submit to the Red ceremonies, but repent of their action will be admitted to confirmation at the discretion of the local pastor.

Debelius has pointed out the gravity of the situation by citing one East German town of 20,000 in which only three of the 200 eligible children were confirmed while all the others participated in youth dedication. "Obviously," said Dibelius, "the Church is not simply going to write off these young people."

Communist pressure on parents is strongest in the industrial areas where workers are sometimes reminded that they might lose their jobs or apartments if their children do not go through the Communist ceremony. Usually, it is sufficient for the Communists to point out that few students not so dedicated have any chance of ever gaining admission to secondary schools or universities. The Communists claim that 72.5 percent of all eligible school children in East Germany are now registered for the Jugendweihe.

Parodies of Weddings and Christenings

In similar vein the Communists are trying to denigrate the age-old Christian ceremonies of marriage and christening. They are attempting to replace the "love, honor and obey" in the marriage ceremony with a joint pledge by the couple to "maintain socialist achievement."

According to Evangelische Welt, official organ of the German Protestant Church, the Communist regime is suggesting that newlyweds exchange this vow:

"We pledge to maintain socialist achievement and increase the State power of workers and peasants. We promise we will respect each other, will help care for and help each other, will help each other's professional and cultural development, will take our decisions jointly and will be indissolubly true to each other."

The newspaper said that the formula had been adopted by the town council of Stalinstadt, an East German industrial town, and that it could be regarded as a model for other towns.

At the same time, the regime is attempting to eliminate the christening ceremony. In a number of towns parents have been visited by officials who offered a variety of inducements. They were told, for instance, that if they agreed to a civil naming ceremony it would be given them free and that the child would be given 100 marks (\$24) to start a savings account. Many needy families were offered financial aid for the child's layette.

The Communist officials also explained to hesitant parents that after the public ceremony, the State would not be

opposed to the customary baptism. The first of these civil ceremonies has already taken place in a number of Thuringian towns. They were conducted with great pomp in flower and flag decorated public buildings. Headed by the mayor, the name-giving ceremony was accompanied by speeches and music and singing by children. It was reported the State provided transportation for relatives and friends who otherwise would not have been able to attend.

Relations Deteriorate

Relations between Church and State have deteriorated considerably in the past year and the Church has declared that it had proved impossible to achieve normal relations with the East German State authorities. The Council of the Evangelical Church said it saw "to its sorrow," that the "oppression of conscience and the obstacles to church life, especially in the education of youth, continue."

The Council also confirmed that Prebendary Heinrich Grueber, for nine years liaison representative to the government, had resigned. The government refused to receive him on the pretext that he was not a citizen of East Germany, thus persisting in its recent stand that it would negotiate only with churchmen of East Germany and did not desire contact with such people as Bishop Dibelius.

Bishop Dibelius confirmed on October 1958 what he termed the frustration and oppression facing the Church in East Germany. In a statement he declared that it was many decades since propaganda designed to induce believers to leave the ranks of the Church had been as strong as it was today, and that no country in the world was exposed to so extensive a propaganda effort as was the Soviet Zone of Germany where atheist propaganda is carried on "from house to house, from factory to factory and from office to office."